Pranayama; From the Cave to Yoga

Summary: Deep within the caves of the **Upper Paleolithic**, **shamans** in a state of **trance** (often aided by **psychoactive substances**) painted animals onto the rock. They blew pigments from their mouths in rhythmic, staccato bursts. **Hyper-oxygenation**, **psychotropics**, **animism**, and the flickering light of torches brought the figures to life: the animals seemed to move, truly alive. This **phenomenology of the breath**, combining technical gesture with an **altered state of consciousness**, very likely constitutes the origin of **prāṇāyāma** and **religiosity**.

Text

The setting is approximately 16,000 years ago, during the **Upper Paleolithic**. **Homo sapiens** is then a **hunter-gatherer**, living in small family groups and using tools and weapons made of knapped stone and bone. Clad in animal skins, they form clans settled in modest clusters of huts.

Among prehistoric humans, religious sentiment is powerful and their **spirituality** is **animistic**: they believe in a sacred **life force** that animates all living beings as well as the elements—wind, sun, stones, water.

For about 200,000 years, humans have **mastered fire** and cooked their food, which requires sixteen times less digestive energy. The **enteric brain**, freed from this burden, allowed the **cranial brain** to develop significantly (its volume has doubled since the beginning of fire mastery).

This "upper brain" was able to devote itself to something other than food survival; it is within this new division of labor between the two brains that **spirituality** found favorable ground.

The group in question here lives a semi-nomadic life, following game and seasonal resources. Their territory is located in what is now the south of France—then a marshy **taiga** dotted with coniferous forests. The animal population includes bison, horses, **mammoths**, cave bears, woolly rhinoceroses, hyenas, and saigas. Further north stretches the **tundra**.

In this environment, less harsh than north of the Loire, the landscape consists of rolling limestone hills. Rivers and streams flow at the bottom of the valleys they have carved. These sheltered valleys benefit from a milder **microclimate**; deciduous trees (oaks, elms) are found there.

Camps are set up on the banks, on high ground to avoid flash floods. These settlements, occupied mainly during the long cold months, are often located near deep caves hollowed out of the limestone. These caverns do not serve as permanent dwellings—the darkness is too frightening—but as places of **animistic worship** and refuge in case of danger or extreme weather, much like medieval castles for villagers.

Shamans and Neuro-archaeology

These vast caves are true cathedrals. Only a few members of the clan enter and officiate there: **shamans** who are simultaneously priests, healers, and artists. They are the ones who painted **Lascaux**, **Chauvet**, and so many others. For these animists, the rock itself possesses a soul, just like the animals they represent upon it. They exploit the natural contours of the walls—bumps, fissures—to give birth to a horse, an aurochs, or an antelope.

In the depths of the cavern, darkness reigns. The painters light resinous torches whose flickering light animates the walls. Before painting, they enter a **trance** using **psychoactive substances**: mushrooms, leaves, resins, or venoms. They then prepare their pigments—finely ground colored earths mixed with ash from charcoal, bark, or plants.

The **shaman** takes a slurry of pigment into his mouth and projects it onto the wall by blowing forcefully in short, rapid expirations, like a **natural airbrush**. The shoulder of the beast appears, then the back, the thigh… and suddenly an aurochs lives upon the stone.

The approach of **neuro-archaeology** suggests that these extreme conditions (sensory isolation, **hypercapnia** due to confinement, flickering light) directly stimulated the visual cortex, making the painted figures appear truly vibrant to the shaman’s eyes. Imagine him in a trance, in the heart of this deep, dark cave.

The animals emerge from the relief and, in his eyes, they are alive—truly alive, not just symbolically. In **animistic belief**, everything possesses a soul: the stone, the fire, the painted animal. And so these creatures are born from his **breath** and the colored earth…

Giving life to clay through the breath… does that remind you of anything? *"The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."* (Genesis 2:7)

The origin of **The Path** can be traced back at least 5,000 years (**Indus Valley Civilization**, **Mohenjo-Daro**), but I would not be surprised if the roots of **prāṇa** and **prāṇāyāma**, and thus of **yoga**, plunge much deeper: back to the **Upper Paleolithic**, 12,000 to 17,000 years ago, with these shamans who, in a trance, gave life to animals through their breath.

By painting this way, they inevitably discovered that **controlled breath**, retained and disciplined, produced an intoxication amplified by the plants or mushrooms ingested. This **phenomenology of the breath**—this lived experience of the breathing body as a tool for creation and access to the sacred—is the missing link.

Some **Shaivites** still do the same today with the smoke of **ganja** (**gañjā** in Sanskrit originally meant a "treasure," but became the common term for hemp resin or flowers); shamans worldwide use other substances: **peyote** from the Mexican

plateaus, Amazonian **ayahuasca**, the **fly agaric** mushroom (*Amanita muscaria*) of the Siberian steppes, or even **salvia**. This is very likely the origin of **religiosity** and the first steps of **yoga** centered on the breath, or **pranayama**.